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**A Simple Start –  
A potential use of simplified English materials in the inclusive classroom.**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines issues surrounding simplified English materials (SEMs) and their usage. It considers their value in light of widespread support for authentic materials, the communicative approach and bilingual support and learning, contrasting this with the call for language simplification for children with Down syndrome. It sets these conflicting messages against a discussion of differentiated materials and current classroom practices. Drawing on these two different strands it suggests that SEMs could serve a very effective strategic role with all pupils as the starting point of lessons.

**Keywords**

Simplified English, Differentiation, Pedagogy, Lesson plans

**Introduction**

Simplified English materials (SEMs) are generally associated with literacy development, language learning and differentiation. Building on the notions of a General Service List (West 1953), numerous reading and language learning schemes have used graduated word lists that begin with highly restricted, simplified lexicons, and develop the complexity of vocabulary and grammar through stages. Such schemes have used texts that are newly written or abridged, and have involved both fiction and non-fiction. They have ranged from Michael West's New Method Supplementary Readers in the 1950's through the Janet and John readers of the 1960's to those currently popular in schools, such as the Heinemann Guided Readers for those learning English or the Springboard books for young children learning to read. It is equally possible to find numerous examples of published materials that use some form of simplified English so as to differentiate materials for the needs of different students. Heinemann, for example, have a higher level and foundation level of Geography Matters aimed at pupils at Key Stage 3, and in the latter there is a simplifying of both task and language. Within many classrooms too teaching staff produce materials to achieve these ends, and do so using English that is simplified in comparison to the majority of texts made available in their given setting.

### **Problems with simplified English Materials for language learning**

The use of SEMs for language learning can be criticised from a number of perspectives. Their value has been undercut by the authentic materials movement within the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), by communicative language approaches to language learning and by the growing understanding of the value and right of bilingual students to learn within their first language (L1).

Within EFL it is widely accepted that second language learning goes from the 'whole to parts' (Goodman et al, 1993; Olivares et al 2002); understanding of the message will come before an understanding of the form and structure of the language. It is, therefore, seen as essential that the language being used is authentic. It must not give the learner a false impression of the form and structure. From this perspective the wide range of different discourses and genres that exist within the everyday language use of native speakers need to be made available to the second language (L2) learner if they are to gain an authentic understanding of that language. Simplified materials inevitably impact on authentic nature of the language, whatever forms the simplification takes. Simplifying either content or language will reduce the authenticity of the texts (Tommola 1980).

Authentic materials are an important component within the communicative model of language learning. This model has been carried over from EFL situations into mainstream classrooms, where supposedly meaningful content can be offered within a supposedly meaningful context. It is commonly accepted that schools should try to encourage 'exposure to sophisticated non-simplified subject material' (Barnard and Burgess, 2001, 327). As Scarcella et al (1992) state 'Even beginning ESL learners need a varied reading diet. Teachers need to demonstrate the range of reading functions in English' (104).

A number of authors highlight the need for teachers to deliver material in L1 (Bourne, 2001; Olivares et al, 2002), demonstrating how the role of L1 is clearly important in the learning of L2 and in successful interaction with the mainstream curriculum. In laying out the principles of the communicative approach, Olivares and Lemberger (2002), for example, make it absolutely clear that a learner-centred, constructivist approach is needed and that context and L1 have vital roles to play. Such clear-cut theoretical advantages of immersion techniques and bilingual support mean that SEMs have become a second best pedagogy, criticised as being counterproductive at times. 'The process of simplification often makes learning harder and creates misconceptions about language.' (Goodman et al, 1993, p70).

It is suggested by some authors that such materials are of some use with people who are at a beginning stage of acquiring language (Scarcella et al

1992, Krashen 1982), while Albus et al demonstrated that simplified English dictionaries could be of some use to those at an intermediate level of acquiring language (Albus, Bielinski, Thurlow & Liu 2001), but inappropriate use of these materials at any level will inhibit both language development and language richness over time (Scarcella et al 1992, Krashen 1982). Eskey (1970) for example, points out that simplified reader usage results in students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) coping less well with unsimplified texts.

In addition to these drawbacks, it is unclear to what degree simplification aids comprehension in any group of users. Research into L2 learners suggests that SEMs may be of limited value in developing comprehension. Lotherington-Woloszyn (1988) describes how intermediate English learners ranked simple texts as most comprehensible but did not actually demonstrate any greater comprehension.

As well as to the pedagogic reasons for the support of the use of authentic texts, L1 and bilingual teaching there is a widespread belief that bilingual support is equally an issue of rights. The report on Calderdale LEA (CRE, 1986), for example, argued that the provision for bilingual students in separate settings is in effect racist. During the intervening years the mounting pressure from advocates of inclusion and the changes in legislation have meant that this view is clearly understood and widely accepted.

As can be seen, there are a number of reasons to downplay the value of SEMs, but there are equally a number of practical problems to be faced when considering the use of the communicative approach and L1. As Barnard and Burgess (2001) point out, many teachers do not feel they should fulfil the role of language teachers, nor that bilingual students are their direct responsibility. There is also an uncertainty felt by many teachers about how to best facilitate the learning of bilinguals. In addition, as Bourne (2001) explains there is a lack of bilingual staff within most schools and the significance of their role is usually downplayed. As a consequence of these factors teachers seem to see the production of SEMs as the solution to their problems. Rather than simplifying the task to give access to the information the tendency is to simplify the linguistic material (Barnard & Burgess 2001).

I would suggest that for many teachers this simplification process neatly links with their perception of how they can best differentiate the curriculum, which they feel under pressure to do.

### **Problems with differentiation**

All standard textbooks for the Primary and Secondary levels of schooling, as well as government legislation, codes of practice, guidance and inspection criteria include strong injunctions to differentiate the curriculum. Differentiation is now at the heart of good practice. Nonetheless it is quite easy for this to

become a divisive pedagogic tool, encouraging segregation rather than inclusion. In many situations it merely acts as a form of in-class streaming.

During my years as a Support Teacher within a department for English as an additional language (ESL/E2L/EAL/EMAG) in a Hackney Comprehensive I spent much time in discussion with staff and students about the nature of the curriculum and the means of gaining access to it. Inevitably, during such discussions we came back to exploring the form, function and value of differentiation. Though some staff were not making any real effort to differentiate the work of their class, most staff were clearly making an attempt to do so. The majority of differentiated material production was carried out by support staff, but mainstream staff were increasingly taking an active and participative interest in this role.

Within each class, there were generally around 30 unstreamed students, with five or six languages spoken. Approximately 20 per cent of any class would be EAL, stages 1-3<sup>1</sup> requiring significant support. Within the entire school there were between 60 and 70 per cent of students who fell within the EAL remit. Additionally, within most classes there would be two or three students with a statement of Special Educational Needs.

In the staff's attempts to differentiate the curriculum for this relatively moderate range of difference, it was possible to see Corbett's model of differentiation (2001) being played out. There were some examples of staff operating at the first stage of differentiation, holding onto an SEN deficit model, and merely producing individual programmes and worksheets that isolated individuals. More generally staff were attempting to operate within Corbett's second stage. They were searching to generate different levels of tasks, using a range of teaching styles that encouraged the development of thinking skills. It was less common to find a conscious responsiveness and respect for different learning styles as Corbett recommends, but even this was implicitly taken into consideration by many through their attempt to alter learning tasks and teaching styles. A very few members of staff had intermittently achieved the third stage of differentiation. They would use a wide range of pedagogies that

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<sup>1</sup> Based on ILEA Multiethnic Inspectorate definitions – traditionally used in London, since adapted by H Hester and then by D Hall. A Stage 1 English speaker is deemed to have minimal access to the curriculum and requiring assistance for the most basic language tasks; a Stage 2 English speaker is deemed to require considerable assistance in accessing the curriculum, but will have the ability to cope with simple language tasks unaided; a Stage 3 English speaker is deemed to require some assistance in accessing the curriculum but will be able to cope with a wide variety of curriculum tasks unaided; a Stage 4 English speaker is deemed to require no specific linguistic assistance in accessing the curriculum .

Clearly this system has many drawbacks; the most significant being that it does not differentiate between speaking, listening, writing and reading. It does offer an easy rule of thumb, easily understood by teaching staff.

valued the differences in individuals and attempted to empower the students to be involved in directing their own growth. Achieving this third stage was something that many of us talked about, but never managed to fulfil. When we did, it was usually as part of a team who got on well together and were willing to work outside of the time that was made available within the school day.

A very common strategy among both mainstream and support staff was to differentiate through the use of simplified materials. Concepts were reduced to their core message, language was simplified, using for example short sentences and simple, commonplace words. Images were sometimes used to reinforce text or as the basis for text. Layout was uncluttered. Tasks required a variety of skills to be used and were clearly defined on the page. The materials often found ways to introduce new words or reinforce them within the text or within the images or within the activities. These activities tended to be relevant to the learning task at hand, and often linked in with what the whole class was doing. Sometimes the simplified texts became the basis for the whole class activity. These materials tended to reflect the subject matter being studied by all pupils and were usually produced through a partially collaborative process. The quality of the production tended to depend on the time available and the willingness of staff to share ideas and materials.

Despite the relatively commonplace use of these materials, staff were often frustrated by their impact upon lessons. These materials would generally be handed out at moments deemed appropriate within the lesson to those students deemed to need them, but students and other staff did not always respond in the positive manner that was hoped for. The whole procedure generated a number of significant issues that we observed and discussed. The most commonly observed issues were:

- Some EAL/SEN students feel that they are being picked out from the majority unfairly.
- Some non-EAL/SEN students feel that they should be given the "easy work" too.
- Some EAL/SEN students feel left out of the mainstream curricula up to the point at which "their" materials appear which in turn engenders disaffection and resentment in teaching staff which reduces the value of the differentiated materials.
- A student belief that they cannot do the work unless it is differentiated and an equivalent belief in teaching staff.
- A student demotivation and loss of self-belief in their ability to carry out any work if they receive differentiated materials rarely.
- A miscomprehension by some teaching staff that the production of differentiated materials and their distribution will alone satisfy the differences of the students.

- A confusion within teaching staff over the appropriate level of differentiation required by a specific student and across ranges of difference.
- The uncertainty of criteria governing material production.
- Problems of material ownership and the means by which differentiated materials can be shared and utilised by other teaching staff using different styles, processes and mainstream materials.
- Significant problems generated through rapid turnover and frequent new arrivals.
- These materials are difficult to produce in large quantities.

### **The need to build on similarity**

The core dilemma in the use of differentiated materials as described above was that they were often being divisive and not inclusive. In every problem we identified we could see the role of segregation, individual perceptions of difference, and the impact of systemic context upon them. This posed the question - How can you identify individuals as being different from the majority, and then satisfy the needs that are the cause of the identified difference, without generating divisive judgements that will impact across the system on all individuals and how we support them?

This question is at the heart of the drive for inclusive education. The inclusive school is intended to break down social, cultural, personal, physical and academic barriers. Many schools would claim that to achieve this end they attempt to celebrate difference and diversity, but the risk implied by the observations above, is that merely by identifying difference and attempting to meet its needs, segregation takes place. This is not exactly a groundbreaking observation, of course. From the earliest age we all identify ourselves through comparisons with others, generating a sense of ourselves and others as insiders or outsiders according to context. As a counterbalance to this process therefore it seems sensible to build on the ideas of Susan Hart (1992), to draw upon the similarities between learners and to use them as constructive resources for all, rather than emphasizing differences in the educational needs of children. Just as Hart explores emphasizing the linkage between all learners' needs and special educational needs, we can also examine how meeting the needs of EAL students can improve access to learning for other class members.

### **The positive context for SEMs**

Despite the negative aspects associated with SEMs it seems likely that they could be one of a range of possible pedagogies that can build on similarity. Lotherington-Woloszyn (1988), for example, said, "Simplified versions used judiciously, may help to provide ESL learners with the background knowledge needed for confidently reading an original, unsimplified text." (p147). Bearing in mind the communicative model outlined by Olivares and Lemberger (2002), this would mean that SEMs could expose bilingual learners to higher

knowledge, offering a relatively content-rich environment, particularly when compared to that available in classrooms where there is only dense L2 text available and no bilingual support.

Juxtaposed with the uses of SEMs with bilingual students are their uses with individuals who are considered to have special educational needs. An analysis of recent research, for example, relating to people with Down syndrome, the largest aetiological group among people with learning disabilities (Rondal & Comblain, 1996) and "among the most language handicapped of the learning disabled population" (Bower & Hayes 1994 p. 49) suggests that simplified English materials will be of enormous potential benefit in their accessing of the curriculum. This research material mainly comes from formal research settings and not within classrooms, however it highlights variations in lexicon, sentence structures, sentence and word complexity, memory permanence and memory size, recall and the use of referencing. People with Down syndrome, for example, will typically have a 3 digit short-term memory, and their mean length of utterance (MLU) is generally between 3 – 5 (Broadley & MacDonald, 1993; Buckley, 1993, Jarrold, Baddeley & Phillips 2000). There is generally a reduction in the use of closed class grammatical forms (pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions) (Chapman, Schwartz & Kay-Raining Bird, 1992), a significantly higher number of simple structured sentences, and fewer auxiliary verbs, subordinate clauses, negative sentences and passive sentences (Jenkins 1993). Word length and structure also has an impact on recognition and recall (Marcell 1995, Comblain, 2000), while an increase in formality of the extra-linguistic context will increase the reliance on simplicity of language structure (Rondal & Comblain 1996).

Of course, our understanding of Down syndrome is partial and to a large degree a result of socio-cultural factors. We must be careful how we use and apply this research, not only because many people perform better than research norms, but also because of changes in wider cultural expectations and opportunities. In addition some of this research could lead us to adopt strategies that will produce inaccessible texts. Moore, Clibbens & Dennis (1998) conclude, for example, that children with Down syndrome to some degree reverse the pattern of Thematic Subject Restraint (Karmiloff-Smith 1985) using the full form definite nouns to describe the central character in simple narratives, and ambiguously in complex narratives. This suggests there is likely to be some confusion in the use of pronouns. In an attempt to avoid this confusion we could end up with text that becomes repetitive and very tedious to read, such as this:

John Soane left school. John Soane could not find a job. John Soane had to work for his brother. John Soane's brother was a bricklayer. John Soane did not like doing this work. But John Soane was lucky. John Soane met a man called James Peacock. James Peacock liked John Soane. James Peacock



introduced John Soane to a friend of his. James Peacock introduced John Soane to a man called George Dance.

Despite a need to closely examine the practice suggested by research, the wider body of evidence does demonstrate the kinds of issues that classroom teachers need to bear in mind when developing inclusive practices for people with learning disabilities, and when considering the role that SEMs could play as a pedagogic tool. This is backed up too by organisations such as the Down Syndrome Educational Trust and the Down's Syndrome Association who recommend within their educational support packs that staff simplify their language whenever they can.

There are other developments within current practice that also lend themselves to changing classroom attitudes towards working on language and through language. There are changes taking place within the training of teachers, the development of pedagogy, and national strategies and policies that mean teachers are more likely to take a flexible approach to their role in language learning and toward the development of materials. There is an increased emphasis on the role of language in learning and on the importance of adult intervention to guide learning, for example, in developments such as the National Literacy Strategy Framework (DfEE 1998). There is also an increasing emphasis that written languages vary according to purpose (Bourne 2001). Teachers are becoming more open to their role as language teachers and in viewing language more flexibly. The demands of the National Curriculum and changes in teacher training has encouraged the development of team planning and co-operative teaching (Bourne 2001) too, with increasing numbers of support staff working within the primary and secondary setting. All of these factors suggest that the current climate suits the re-examination of SEM usage.

### **Simplified English Materials as an Inclusive introduction?**

So far we have seen that there is a possible selective value for using SEMs with bilingual students and that their use is considered good practice in regard to some SEN students. Is it possible that they could also be of value to the whole class? There is some evidence to suggest this might also be the case - for example, the use of simplified English in the writing of test questions has been shown to have a positive impact on all student results (Abedi, Lord & Plummer 1997) – but here too the lack of a broad evidence-base makes any firm conclusions impossible. It is however reasonable to propose a number of hypotheses about possible strategic SEM use. This paper now focuses on one of these possible strategies.

It is widely accepted practice that openings of lessons should include a review of the work that has come before and should then lay out what will follow.

'Although most teachers do, as a matter of course, include activities to allow students to re-orient themselves and re-connect with ideas already discussed in previous lessons, her observations brought home to her how much more remote the previous lesson and previous learning may be to the student than to the teacher (who has planned and prepared the lesson); and how important it is therefore, at the start of lessons, that activities do actively engage all students in reformulating the knowledge that is a prerequisite for learning in the current lesson. (Hart and Travers, 1999, 39)

Similar advice is offered by the DfES to teachers when whole class teaching too (DfES 2003), and can be found in many teacher training publications (Capel et al, 2001), as well as being deemed good practice by OFSTED. It is part of the essential introduction for the whole class, for as Jill Porter (2003) succinctly puts it, 'It should not be assumed that students will automatically retain previous knowledge and skills.' (121). In addition, such an introduction gives all students the chance to separate themselves from the day's previous activity and to realign to the next.

The suggestion of this paper is that SEMs may act as an excellent inclusive pedagogic tool at this opening juncture. By presenting a simple English worksheet at the start of the lesson it could serve as an introduction, a reminder, and an incentive to all students. The SEM, if appropriate, could also include the first activity for the lesson, for example a simple piece of text to discuss or a set of instructions for an open ended task that could lead to complex conceptual thinking. Fundamentally all students would use this SEM, before moving onto the next stage of the lesson. However, as opposed to aiming at an assumed middle range of the students when the lesson is introduced, or dividing the class into groups and offering predetermined differentiation the method aims to be inclusive from the beginning. It is intended to make it easier for individual students to move beyond the basic principles according to both their linguistic and/or conceptual characteristics. Following on from the usage of the SEM would be additional worksheets or activities that respond to an individual learning style, or introduce one of a wide range of pedagogies that values the differences of students. It would be important that the lesson did not become bogged down at this introductory stage, but rather acted as a catalyst to the majority as well as a platform for the rest. It is important therefore that this inclusive first stage is not just seen as an early lowering of the linguistic or cognitive level. It must be understood to be part of the essential introduction to the lesson for everyone.

By being the starting point for the whole class, this SEM could overcome many of the problems highlighted in relation to differentiated materials. Students otherwise isolated by receiving separate materials would avoid being marked out, and therefore would be more likely to feel there is an equality to their work

and an equal opportunity to explore the topic at hand. This positive attitude can be drawn upon with the materials and activities that follow. A significant aim for this approach would also be for more students to feel they can engage with the content immediately, including those who have been recently absent or have newly arrived in a class. In addition, production will be a whole class issue and their production could well encourage greater collaboration with support staff. It could also enable teachers and support staff, as well as students, to clarify the purpose and process of the lesson, helping them to assist and include everybody more effectively.

A core question to be answered is the level at which language should be set. Would it be applicable to use a language base predicated on the Down syndrome model only if people with Down syndrome were in a class? Would the complexity of that language base be altered if the class only contained students at stage 3 of English acquisition? Clearly these issues need to be researched further, but if we extrapolate from the findings of Abedi, Lord and Plummer (1997) it is possible to suggest that there is a language base that could produce materials of use to all students, regardless of who was in the class that day.

The fundamental premise is that while complex language structures and semiotics make available increased nuances of meaning and increased speed of transmission, all concepts are explicable through SEMs, and that simplified text can allow access to the subject matter for the majority of EAL, SEN and other non-categorised students. This paper is not suggesting, however, that this alone will achieve this end. There can be no one best method and as Prabhu says, "working with such an ideal is unproductive for the pedagogic profession", (pg 169)

As has been made clear earlier in this paper, simplification has many limitations. It runs a risk similar to traditional models of differentiation. 'Simplification...risks creating categories that rapidly become too insensitive to cope with changing audiences and changing conceptual needs.' (Brumfit, 1993,)

If we are making judgements about the levels students can attain and defining what they should do based on that judgement then we are bound to restrict the growth of a fair proportion of those students. This is a dilemma that all teachers will recognise as part of their daily working lives. Teaching is very much about the simplification of ideas and language in an attempt to open them up for exploration and understanding, but if we fail to reduce these ideas and language to a core that is meaningful and relevant to our learners then we will not induce them to explore nor to understand.

Hopefully, the use of SEMs as the starting point for lessons would build on teachers strengths as simplifiers of information, but do so in such a way as to

maximise the possibility of gaining the attention of learners, offering them a starting point from which they can all move according to their individual learning differences. In addition, teaching staff will have benefited by breaking down the concepts into a simple structure, enhancing their pedagogic flexibility and sensitivity to other's understandings.

One of the aims of this method, in attempting to be inclusive in the majority of classes from the moment work commences, is that students will be more likely to feel in control and to take responsibility for their own progress within each lesson. Hopefully, teachers will feel able to encourage this mindset further in the class work that follows.

## **Conclusion**

This paper outlines a number of uncertainties in regard to the value of simplified English text as a tool for increased comprehension. It also highlights difficulties in the current use of differentiated materials. The logic of the argument for the use of SEMs at the start of lessons is predicated on the assumptions that they will enhance comprehension for some and not impede comprehension for the rest, and that they will assist in removing some of the barriers created by differentiation. Clearly these assumptions need to be tested further, and within a variety of subject areas and learning environments. In so doing, however, we may also come across other strategic uses for SEMs to assist in meeting differing learning needs within different contexts.

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